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By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

Special to The New York Times

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In addition, they said, General Noriega is a secret investor in Panamanian export companies that sell restricted American technology to Cuba and Eastern European countries.

Espionage Investigation in '70's

In the mid-1970's, according to former officials of the National Security Agency, General Noriega was implicated in a secret espionage investigation involving the transfer of highly sensitive agency materials to Havana. These officials said General Noriega purchased the N.S.A. documents from a United States Army sergeant on duty in Panama.

A White House official, discussing General Noriega's role in what he depicted as the "Panamanian connection," said curtailing the general's activities would play an enormous role in stopping the international trafficking of drugs by organized crime.

The head of the Panamanian military, called the Panama Defense Force, is widely viewed as the politically dominant force in the country.

General Noriega is on a visit to the United States this week and presented a Panamanian medal of honor today at



Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega of Panama at a reception yesterday at Fort McNair near Washington.

a private ceremony at the Inter-American Defense Board. Requests to interview the general in Washington received no response.

In Panama last weekend, General Noriega could not be interviewed to discuss the Americans' assertions despite three days of telephone calls to the army press office and attempts to reach him through other senior army officers.

Spokesman Denies Assertions

The general, said Capt. Eduardo E. Lim Yueng, the second in command of the Panama Defense Force press office, was too busy with other important business. Two days of telephone calls, including several written messages left with secretaries, brought no reply from the presidential press office.

Captain Lim Yueng, however, denied the assertions as a spokesman for the "institution of the armed forces and for General Noriega." He said General

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Noriega and the military were the victims of a campaign of slander that had no basis in fact.

"These are political attacks," he said. "General Noriega would answer the same way. This campaign is trying to damage our institution."

A White House official said the intelligence information about General Noriega's activities had been made available to senior officials of the White House. But this official and others said they did not know whether President Reagan was aware of the reports.

A senior Reagan Administration official would not discuss the assertions against General Noriega, who was previously head of military intelligence and became army commander when Brig. Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera was killed in a helicopter crash in 1981. The Administration official expressed concern that the intelligence information would damage relations with Panama if it was seen as reflecting the views of the White House.

Officials in the Reagan Administration and past Administrations said in interviews that they had overlooked General Noriega's illegal activities because of his cooperation with American intelligence and his willingness to permit the American military extensive leeway to operate in Panama.

They said, for example, that General Noriega had been a valuable asset to Washington in countering insurgencies in Central America and was now cooperating with the Central Intelligence Agency in providing sensitive information from Nicaragua.

But many Reagan Administration officials made clear in interviews that the extent of General Noriega's activities was seen as a potential national security threat because of the strategic importance of Panama and the Panama Canal. Under treaties negotiated with General Torrijos in the 1970's, the United States has agreed to turn the canal over to Panama in the year 2000.

"It's precisely because we have long-term strategic interests in Panama, with the canal, that it's important to have reliable people we can deal with," a senior American diplomat said. In addition, Panama has become increasingly important for the United States and its monitoring of insurgencies in Central America.

General's Activities: 'Legal and Illegal'

A recent classified report by the Defense Intelligence Agency concludes that General Noriega, operating through a small band of top associates in the military, maintains tight control of drug and money-laundering activities by his associates in the Panama Defense Force, according to one American official. The study said the general was "deeply involved in legal and illegal business."

"Nothing moves in Panama without the instructions, order and consent of Noriega," the official said.

According to the State Department, White House, Pentagon and intelligence sources, there has been long-standing evidence among intelligence officials of General Noriega's activities, including his relations with the Cuban Government and his willingness to sell arms to the M-19 rebel group in Colombia.

The goal of M-19, which is pro-Cuban, is to overthrow the democratically elected Government. Over the years, the guerrilla group has been responsible for violent attacks that have led to hundreds of deaths.

Of the assertion on the M-19 guerrillas, Captain Lim Yueng, the Panamanian Army spokesman, said: "We have no information on M-19. We do all we can to avoid Panama being used as a trampoline for terrorism."

General Noriega was involved in any shady activities with Cuba. He also denied any export of embargoed goods to Cuba. "Cuba has an embassy here and normal relations with us like many countries," the captain said.

He added, "We've captured drugs here, and are doing our best to collaborate with the United States to fight narcotics in Panama."

'A Critical Misjudgment' In Killing of a Critic

What has come to be seen within the United States Government as the Noriega problem was heightened by recent intelligence directly tying the general and the top leadership of the Panama Defense Force to the slaying last September of Dr. Hugo Spadafora, one of the army's leading critics.

In his statement, Captain Lim Yueng said: "There is absolutely nothing in this case involving the army. Spadafora had many enemies. The institution of the armed forces absolutely denies any ties to the death of Spadafora. We criticize this crime."

A classified Defense Intelligence Agency report on General Noriega de-

scribed his involvement in the killing as "a critical misjudgment" on his part. The D.I.A. is also known to have intelligence demonstrating that General Noriega ordered the killing, according to an official with first-hand information.

Dr. Spadafora's decapitated body was found stuffed in a United States mailbag in Costa Rica just across the Panamanian-Costa Rican border. The killing occurred a few weeks before General Noriega ousted the civilian President, Nicolás Ardito Barletta, who was about to name an investigating commission.

Mr. Barletta was replaced by Eric Arturo Delvalle, who is viewed by American officials as another nominal leader, with the army commander actually in control of the country.

Some senior White House officials have privately been concerned about General Noriega's activities. Late last year Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, then the newly appointed national security adviser, visited the general and privately told him to "cut it out" — alluding to the drug and money laundering activities and his close relations with Cuba, according to a Government official.

Admiral Poindexter was later quoted as having raised questions about an alternative to the Panamanian general.

The issue is a chronic one for American policy makers: how far to overlook corruption and a lack of democratic principles in allies in order to protect secret intelligence installations.

Senior civilian officials in the Pentagon, headed by Nestor D. Sanchez, a former C.I.A. and White House aide for Latin American issues who is a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs, are known to be concerned that any successor to General Noriega might not be willing to tolerate the American military activities that now exist in Panama.

In Panama, a Web Of U.S. Intelligence

Since the early 1980's the National Security Agency, operating through its military components in the Army, the Navy and the Air Force, has vastly increased its intelligence-gathering activities in Panama. It is now capable of monitoring all of Central America and most of South America from its Panamanian installations.

The Central Intelligence Agency has also used military bases in Panama, especially Howard Air Base near Panama City, as a jumping-off point for intelligence gathering and for agents sent to Nicaragua, according to intelligence officials.

Officials emphasized the nature of the evidence tying General Noriega and the top leadership of the Panama Defense Force to money-laundering and drug trafficking activities.

One official who said he had extensively reviewed the most sensitive intelligence available to the American Government on General Noriega, including reports from agents and intercepts, described most of the specifics as "having to do with gun and drug running."

He said General Noriega's name appeared "over and over" in connection with specific dates, places and contacts in money-laundering and drug activities.

Much of the information, the sources acknowledged, has been gleaned from National Security Agency intercepts, among the most highly classified information in the Government.

In interviews, intelligence officials repeatedly described General Noriega as brilliant in masking much of his direct involvement, preferring to operate

through cutouts or as a secret partner in Panamanian trading companies and banks.

An American official with long experience in Panamanian affairs noted that the general seemed to have become more circumspect in his pattern of activity in the early 1980's, moderating overt support for M-19 and direct financial involvement in drug activities.

Instead, the official said, the general has invested more heavily in legitimate business ventures and become more involved in what were described as safer and more lucrative activities — money laundering, much of it, according to American law enforcement agencies, known to be drug-related. In addition, the official said, he has also become involved in the shipping of high-technology American goods, much of them on restricted lists, from duty-free zones in Panama to Cuba and countries in Eastern Europe.

Colombian Rebels And the Panamanians

According to American intelligence officials, there is evidence tying General Noriega to longstanding arms dealing to M-19, the Colombian rebel group.

Such shipments dwindled in the last few years, officials said, apparently in response to pressure from the Reagan Administration, but have begun to flow again. General Noriega's M-19 trafficking "continues today," said an official with access to the most current intelligence.

The most specific details of General Noriega's involvement with M-19 were provided by C.I.A. officials. In one instance, carefully monitored by the agency, General Noriega and members of the Panama Defense Force were found to have armed a small M-19 band — estimates range from 60 to more than 100 — before an unsuccessful attack on Colombia's west coast in early 1982.

Members of the M-19 group, which had been trained in Cuba, were tracked by American intelligence as they left Havana and flew to Panama, according to intelligence officials. They said the rebels were then armed by members of the Panama Defense Force and shipped by a boat, which had passed through the canal, from Panama Bay to two locations off the coast of Colombia.

The guerrilla bands were eventually found and attacked by Colombian officials, with heavy loss of life, according to intelligence officials. Diaries were seized in which the recruits told of their training in Havana and their stay in Panama, including an overnight stay in a safehouse that was said to have been provided by members of the Panama Defense Force.

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told of viewing reconnaissance film, believed to have been taken by a high-flying U-2, depicting M-19 aircraft off-loading drugs at a Panamanian Air Defense Force airstrip. Arms were said to have been loaded into the craft for its return to Colombia.

Through his legal and illegal activities, American officials said, General Noriega has amassed an enormous personal fortune, much of which is believed to be deposited in European banks. He is reported to own at least two homes in Panama City and one in southern France. As army commander, officials said, General Noriega earns a salary of \$1,200 a month.

General Noriega is also reported to have a substantial interest in a bank in the Colon, Panama, Free Zone, which American officials said is heavily involved in laundering money for the M-19 as well as for narcotics dealers.

Laundering Money And Shipping Drugs

According to a 1985 assessment of "U.S. Narcotics Control Programs Overseas," published by the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Panama is regarded by American law enforcement officials as a "drug and chemical transshipment point and money-laundering center for drug money."

Panama's banking laws are among the most stringent in the world, permitting secret accounts by individuals and corporations that are virtually free from scrutiny by American law enforcement officials. Additionally, Panama's corporation laws allow companies to be organized with no public disclosure of principals. As a result, Panama has become a world leader in the depositing of illegal profits from drug dealing and other activities.

Cash on deposit at a Panamanian bank can simply be sent by wire to banks in the United States or elsewhere, part of the process known as money laundering, in which the ultimate source of the money is disguised through a series of transactions.

A White House official said the most significant drug-running in Panama was being directed by General Noriega.

"Doing away with the Panamanian connection — in the sense that General Noriega condoned and protects such activity — would put one hell of a dent in the movement of drugs in organized crime," the White House official said. "That's the bottom line."

In the recent interviews, Administration officials depicted General Noriega's current drug function as that of a "facilitator." The officials cited intelligence reports showing that he is a secret investor in companies controlled by a Panamanian businessman and is financially involved in a series of trading companies.

A former White House aide depicted General Noriega's role as being to "facilitate the shipments and pay the pay-offs."

The former aide added: "Noriega doesn't carry the stuff around. They pay him a percentage for protection of the traffic."

General Noriega's involvement in money laundering was similarly described by American intelligence and diplomatic officials as a behind-the-scenes role, with private export companies acting as his agent.

Officials said the United States had intelligence showing that in the early 1980's General Noriega held a major

interest in an opium-processing plant that was discovered, according to a House Foreign Affairs Committee investigation in 1985, in operation along the Panamanian-Colombian border.

The Congressional report noted that the laboratory was apparently financed by Colombians along with a senior member of the Panama Defense Force whom it identified as a Colonel Melo.

The colonel and others were arrested by the Panama Defense Force, the report noted, but "none was prosecuted due to lack of evidence." Administration officials said that despite the officer's arrest and dismissal from the military by General Noriega, he was still living openly in Panama City.

Customs officials have filed many criminal indictments in which the role of members of the Panama Defense Force was prominent. In one case, involving a private Panamanian freight carrier, Inair Cargo Airlines, a Federal grand jury returned an indictment charging conspiracy to move "multi-million-dollar shipments" of cash to Panama.

According to American officials, there is evidence tying General Noriega and members of the Defense Force to a financial involvement in a small airline charter company that, operating out of the main airport in Panama City, flies weekly money-laundering missions in and out of the United States. The aircraft is met in Panama by an armored truck.

Noriega Reported Linked to a Killing

According to American officials, the Defense Intelligence Agency has uncovered evidence linking General Noriega to the slaying of Dr. Spadafora.

General Noriega has repeated military denials of involvement in the killing.

One White House official who has access to the Government's intelligence reports said "there is no doubt" that General Noriega was directly implicated in Dr. Spadafora's death.

Another official said the intelligence "takes it up to him" — General Noriega — "as the originator of the idea and the planning of it." There is no evidence, the official added, that General Noriega was directly involved in the actual torture and slaying of Dr. Spadafora, who was beheaded.

General Noriega is known, according to highly sensitive American intelligence information, to have told "several aides in prior days that 'I want that guy's head,'" the official said. American intelligence officials in Panama are known to have reviewed the Panamanian medical reports on the slaying and confirmed, the official added, that Dr. Spadafora was tortured four to six hours while alive.

Another American official, who was in Central America at the time of the slaying, similarly declared that the United States "knows" — he emphasized that word — "that the Panamanian Defense Force did him in; these are people who were working under Noriega."

This official also said, however, that "who gave the order and why it was done in the way it was, we don't know." The possibility cannot be ruled out, he added, that some of General Noriega's associates may have killed him without an express order in hopes of currying favor with their leader.

A Supplier of Data To Cuba and U.S.

General Noriega's ties to Cuba have touched off a longstanding debate among intelligence agencies.

The C.I.A. has viewed General Noriega as an invaluable asset since the 1970's because of his willingness to provide intelligence on the Cubans. He later became a valuable source of inside information on the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and, informed officials said, has used the Panamanian Embassy in Managua to collect intelligence for the United States.

At the time, it was also known that General Noriega was supplying intelligence on the United States and its activities in Panama and elsewhere to the Cubans.

"The station chiefs loved him," a former American Ambassador to Panama recalled, referring to intelligence agents. "As far as they were concerned, the stuff that they were getting was more interesting than what the Cubans were getting from Noriega on us."

Another American official told of a briefing in Washington at which he was assured that General Noriega was "our man." After the American was posted to Panama City, one of the first National Security Agency intercepts that crossed his desk said that the D.S.G.I., the Cuban intelligence agency, had assured its operatives in Panama that General Noriega was "their man."

One former senior C.I.A. official who served in Panama when General Noriega was chief of intelligence under General Torrijos defended his agency's reliance on General Noriega.

"To me, he was under continuous attack by people who kept saying, 'Look at this with Havana.' But he was G-2," or intelligence. It was General Noriega's job, the C.I.A. official explained, to stay in close contact with Havana.

"As to who had the upper hand — and this was debated for years — the United States or Cuba, I frankly think it was the United States that came out ahead" because of General Noriega's reporting, he said.

A Breach of Security: 'Singing Sergeants'

The most disturbing breach of security in General Noriega's relationship with Cuba involved his recruitment of an American Army intelligence sergeant in the mid-1970's. The incident briefly came into public view in the fall of 1977, in a critical period in the Carter Administration's negotiations with Panama on the future of the canal.

Among other details, the sergeant informed General Noriega of the clandestine monitoring of senior Panamanian

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nian officials, according to intelligence officials. There were later allegations from American critics of the Panama Canal treaties that the United States had eavesdropped on Panamanian negotiations, had been caught in the process and was being threatened with exposure unless last-minute concessions were made. The Senate Intelligence Committee, after investigating the incident, concluded that there was no evidence that the Panamanians had made any blackmail threats.

The incident became known inside the Carter Administration as the case of the "singing sergeants," and the breach of security was widely considered to be limited to interceptions of personal conversations, some of them highly embarrassing, by General Torrijos.

Retired N.S.A. officials, in recent interviews, depicted the breach as far more troublesome and one that directly involved General Noriega. In the officials' account, the sergeant began dealing with General Noriega. Transcripts of intercepts of General Torrijos were turned over, in return for cash payments, as well as highly sensitive technical materials, including manuals that described how various N.S.A. systems worked. "Quite detailed N.S.A. documents were given to Noriega" and ended up in Cuba, a former N.S.A. official recalled.

General Noriega enraged some

American officers in the late 1970's, according to an intelligence report, when he purchased 10 new American-made automobiles while on a visit to Washington and then, upon his return, turned over the vehicles to the Cuban diplomatic delegation in Panama City.

Many American officials, despite their hostility to General Noriega's involvement in these activities, expressed admiration for his ability to keep his various constituencies — such as the United States and Cuba — at bay. One key to his success, some officials said, was his lack of ideology.